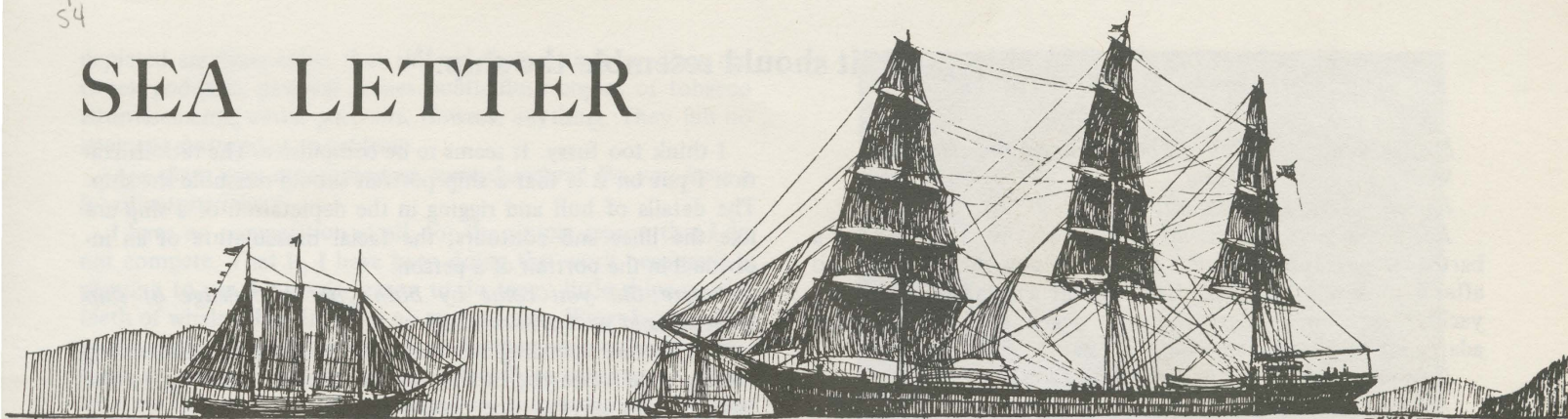


SEA LETTER



OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME MUSEUM / July 1973

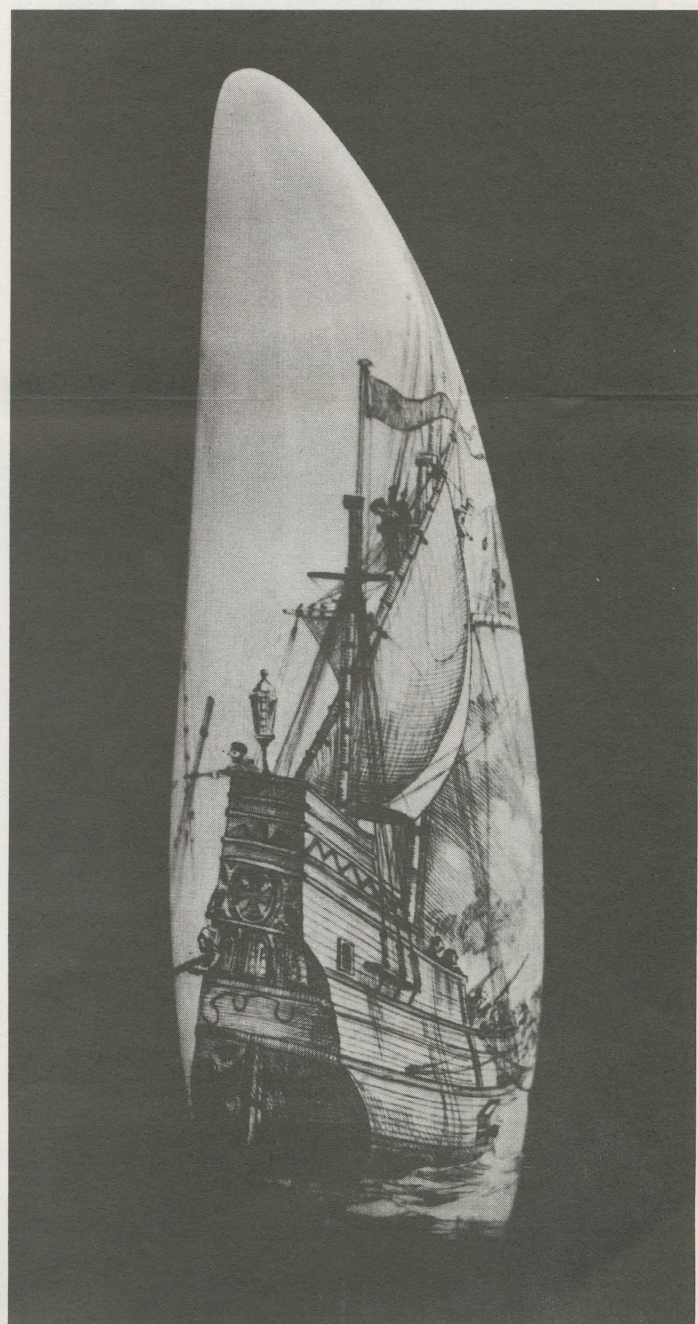
An Invitation to Members and Friends: A special exhibit of scrimshaw by William Gilkerson

The San Francisco Maritime Museum has acquired for its permanent collection three finely engraved sperm whale teeth by master scrimshander William Gilkerson. The teeth depict Northwest Coast whaling scenes and are in a matched set. They will appear in a special exhibit of Gilkerson's work scheduled to occupy the central area of the Museum's main floor daily from July 21 throughout August. A special opening for our members and their friends will be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Friday, July 20, with some special entertainment and cocktails.

Scrimshaw was begun in the last century and has remained a living art from throughout the successive generations of seamen who have carried it forward into the present time. Antique scrimshaw is highly prized by collectors today, and new work also has great value if it shows exceptional skill. The photos on these pages illustrate some of the work Gilkerson has done which will be on view.

Altogether some half hundred pieces will be on hand here, including engraved scrimshaw and also ivory carvings ornamenting various artifacts—walking sticks, pendants, weapons, even some ivory-mounted bagpipes. Many of the items gathered for this display are on loan from private collections; others are recent works, some of which will be for sale. None of the pieces in the show have previously been anywhere on public view.

Gilkerson began scrimshanding while voyaging under sail in Europe and America in various vessels which he has skippered over the years. Currently he is ashore, and he will be on hand working at his craft during much of the time of the exhibit. In the following interview, he answers the pertinent questions about his work and views.



“... A ship portrait should resemble the ship.”

Mr. Gilkerson, how did you begin doing scrimshaw?

With great care.

I mean, how did you get into it?

Accidentally. A dear friend of mine who is a bouncer and a bartender gave me a whale's tooth one day several years ago after I took him for a sail. I engraved it with a portrait of my yacht, "Griffyn," a traditionally rigged gaff ketch which adapted itself to the medium.

How long does it take to scrimshaw a tooth?

Always too long. Hours and hours and hours. Days. Weeks. I've asked this question a lot and never have a definitive answer because I never keep track of the time. Maybe it would demoralize me if I did.

You mentioned earlier that scrimshaw, having been started by American whalers in the early 1800's, is about the only art form considered indigenous to the United States. Have you studied and been influenced by the old pieces you've seen in museums and in books?

Yes and no. I'm sure that's where the idea came from when my pal gave me that first tooth, but when I engraved it I used my own style and portrayed the boat as realistically as possible. I've worked that way ever since. All my engravings are of my own conception and design, with the exception of a very few ship portraits I've copied from photos because the vessel to be portrayed wasn't available.

How fussy are you about accuracy in your scrimshaw'd ship portraits?

I think too fussy. It seems to be compulsive. The rationalization I put on it is that a ship portrait should resemble the ship. The details of hull and rigging in the depiction of a ship are like the lines and contours, the facial musculature of an individual in the portrait of a person.

Where did you come by both your knowledge of ship anatomy and your artistic skill?

The former spending most of my life aboard various sailing vessels. And research, in the case of ancient craft. As to the latter, I can't say. Practice, probably.

What tools do you use in scrimshawing a tooth?

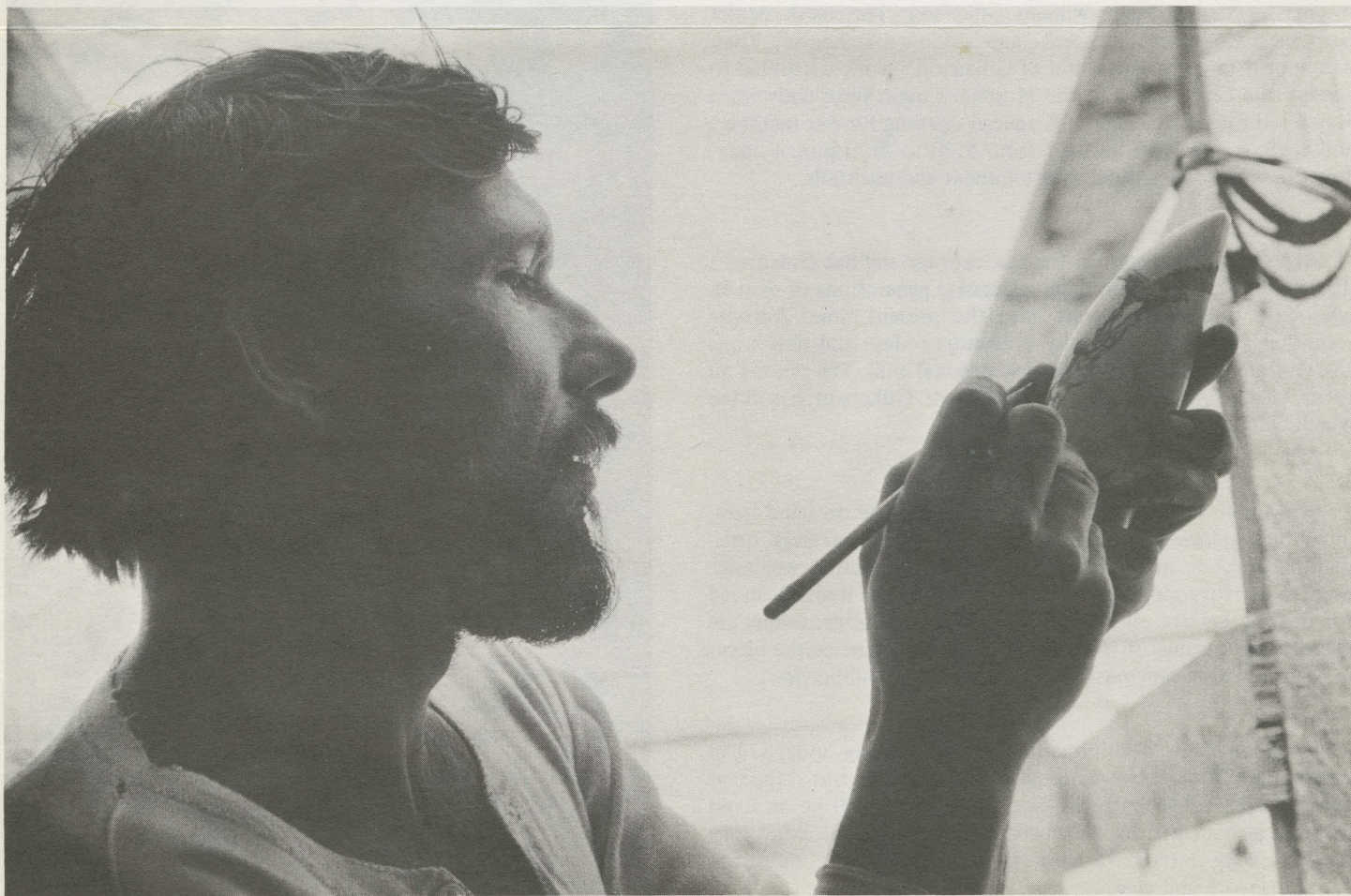
Only a knife. In that way my work is more or less traditional and a throwback to the last century.

You use the word traditional. Most antique scrimshaw seems much more primitive in its approach than yours. Do you consider your work to be traditional?

The old sailors did the best they could to graphically depict subjects on whale's teeth, and their work was naturally influenced by the styles of their time. The same is inescapably true of me. My approach is exactly the same as theirs, but it reflects different conditioning. You might say the scrimshaw tradition was a sailor with time to kill amusing himself by carving or engraving ivory. That is true of me, although my circumstances are a couple of centuries different.

Why do some of your teeth depict other subjects than ships?

It's refreshing to do something besides ships now and again. That, too, can be considered traditional. Many whalers



depicted anything other than ships in their scrimshaw. They did Greek goddesses, pastoral scenes, meticulous copies of tobacco advertisements, cows, portraits, flowers, anything. They felt no apparent restraint as to subject.

Are there very many modern scrimshanders? Do you have a lot of competition?

I have no competition at all, for the simple reason that I do not compete. That is, I have been doing this work because it is pleasing to me for some reason to do teeny little ships on the teeth of whales. This involves no competition. When I compete I arm wrestle. Sure, there are a lot of other people doing scrimshaw. As far as I can see, these are mostly in two groups: those who are forging "antique" work and are necessarily anonymous, and those who are producing the work in those gift stores specializing in marine items. Some of the work seems competent. Much of it is mass produced. For instance, I have seen photos of a Japanese machine that works with a multiple stylus that makes 10 teeth simultaneously as the engraver does the original. I find no fault with this, but it has nothing to do with my approach. I can't make comparisons because they somehow don't make any sense to me.

Don't you do your work to sell?

I can't. Not only am I completely unable to figure out what people want to buy, but I am happily uninterested as well. If I don't allow myself to worry whether or not something is going to sell, I get to do it just the way I want to. It seems to work best that way.

You sound as though you have a very self-indulgent attitude toward your work.

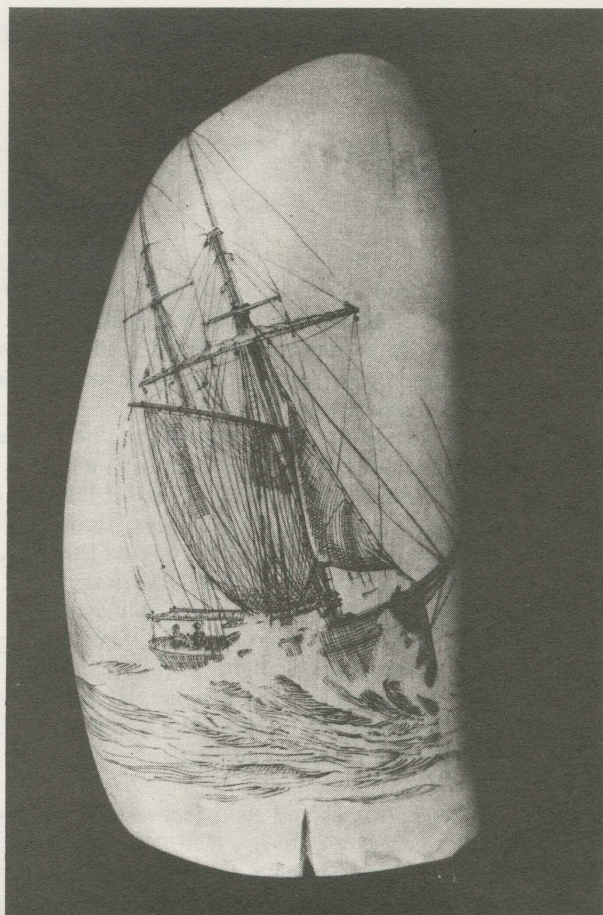
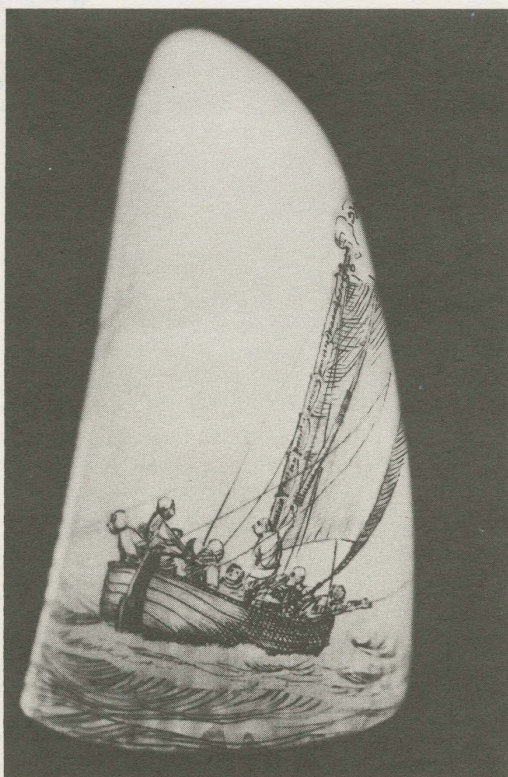
Exactly.

But you do in fact sell your work.

Of course. But my big kick is in working on it. When it's finished it's of no further use to me, unless I lapse into some kind of attachment for it.

How do you price your work?

Without system.



Have you ever forged an antique tooth? An honest answer, please.

No, I haven't. I think I probably could do an excellent forgery, and might sometime. I have no particular scruples against it. But I haven't yet because it would mean meticulously imitating somebody else's work, which sounds very boring. Also, as it happens I charge more for my new work than much old stuff sells for, which entirely removes the incentive.

To whom do you sell?

Mostly private collectors. Some to people who find me and commission me to do portraits of their yachts.

Is your work available in shops or galleries?

The only places in which I regularly put a piece or two of my work are the Scrimshaw Shops in Sausalito and on Balclutha, run by my pal Peter Bowen.

On the subject of whales, the Sperm Whale (whose teeth you use) is officially on the list of endangered species; the American whale fisheries have been closed, and imports of whale products have been banned. Further, after the expenditure of current stocks, no California merchant will be allowed to sell any products made from the carcasses of any creatures which are on the endangered list. How do you reconcile your work with all this?

I don't. I am in sympathy with the various laws that have been created for the protection of whales, and even more in sympathy with the whales themselves. The poor creatures have become so valuable as cat food that they have been slaughtered to the point of extinction. For that reason and another (this white-line-on-white-surface ivory engraving is becoming too much for my eyes, which are strained), I am phasing out of my work, I have a few teeth left but when the small current supply is gone, I'll turn back to painting and sketching.

“Forty-two loads in an hour, that was the best hour . . . ”

The efficiency of loading “under the wire” in a Sonoma or Mendocino coast doghole is made clear by a statement by George Call Pearce at the San Francisco Maritime Museum in July of last year.

Mr. Pearce spent his first eighteen years on the Sonoma County coast and helped Carlos Call operate the port at Fort Ross (see *Sea Letter*, August 1972). He was brought into the museum by his sister Mrs. Mercedes Stafford whilst on a visit from Ohio, where he is now retired from work with General Motors as an engineer and executive.

Carlos* recalled for me the other day that the best we ever did was forty-two loads of ties put aboard ship in an hour. We were loading the NEWBERG. Put the sling on, lift the wire and that lifted the load . . . it ran out by gravity, three or four hundred feet to the steam schooner. They lowered the wire and put the load down on deck. Then clear the sling, bring the trolley back . . . forty-two times in sixty minutes we ran through that cycle. We were always rushing . . . it cost money to keep a ship in port; everybody was pushing.

Carlos was the engineer; I was the fireman. We had a steam donkey engine to haul back the traveler and to lift the load to get it started. We worked twelve hours at a time. I got \$1.00 a day for my efforts.

Ties are six by eight inches and eight feet long. Twenty-five ties to the load, I would say averaging 150 lbs. apiece—quite a few were 200 lbs. Carlos said that they had one tie one time that weighed 400 lbs.

That time with the NEWBERG we put aboard 14,000 ties in a day and a half.

Ties were the big thing at that time in our country, although we loaded some lumber at Fort Ross. Lumber was big up at Fort Bragg, Noyo, Albion, up north. They had much more sophisticated equipment than we had down the coast.

I saw them try to load ties one time with a chute, at Stillwater. The ties shot across the deck and into the water—the chutes were made for tanbark and cordwood. But Frank Thomas designed a brake, a pinch brake, and then they could be controlled.

They even used the chutes for loading lumber, but it was a cumbersome operation. They had to catch each board. The other trouble with a chute was that you couldn’t unload anything with it—it was a one-way operation.

We used to ship live hogs to San Francisco in the MARY C. We had a special box to put them in to run them out on the wire. There was a pen on deck for them when they got out there. We carried butter, cordwood, hogs with the MARY C., whatever made a cargo, and brought back merchandise.

The MARY C. was the only way to get in and out of there unless you wanted to go over the mountain with a four horse team.

*Carlos Call was 92 at the time Mr. Pearce was visiting the museum. This most celebrated of residents on the Sonoma County coast died shortly thereafter.

SEA LETTER

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